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A Holy Change of Heart

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I wanted them punished in the worst possible way. Because of what they did to me, and what I believed they were doing to the church. But that's not what happened.

Many of you know I am a graduate of Nashotah House Episcopal Seminary in Wisconsin. There are about 10 Episcopal Seminaries in America, and like the Episcopal Church itself, each seminary is a little different. Nashotah House is the most conservative, especially when it comes to the ordination of women (even to this very day). There are many reasons I chose to attend Nashotah House; I'm not going to go into them here, but I will say of the choices I was given Nashotah is where I felt God was calling me. So I went. I was one of 3 women to matriculate as a full-time student for the Master of Divinity program in a class of 27.

I did not go into seminary completely naive, I was well acquainted with Nashotah's reputation and brought it up in my entrance interviews. I was assured by the administration that they would not tolerate any behavior that threatened another student and if any student did anything to make another feel uncomfortable, the offending student would be removed.

So I was shocked and offended when I discovered a blog being maintained on the public computers in the seminary library that served as a place for the students opposed to the ordination of women to not only complain about women students at Nashotah, but to write violent, offensive fantasies they had about them and the other students who supported them. After reporting what I found, I was disheartened when instead of following through on the promise to expel these students, the administration forced a reconciliation meeting where the contributors of the blog did not apologize but defended their position, stating they felt threatened and believed the ordination of women was the cause of the decline in the church. They saw women students, including me, as their enemy. At the time, I must admit I saw the students opposed to women's ordination as my enemy and I was hurt when the administration did not come to my defense. My bishop at the time told me to pick any seminary in the country and he'd get me there in two weeks.

I am a person of prayer, and when I prayed, I did not hear God tell me to leave Nashotah House. So, even though I didn't always feel safe at times, even though it was not a good situation in that moment, I stayed. And thank God I did. Because something beautiful emerged from all the pain not just me or the students opposed to women's ordination, but the entire community felt.

Nashotah House follows what they call a Benedictine discipline of study, prayer, work, and community. There are a lot of mandatories for students: two chapel services a day, two meals the community shares daily and one monthly community dinner, it is a small school so members of each class have the exact same class schedule, there are mandatory work crew days where students help care for the physical campus, everyone takes turns leading worship, and working in the refectory (seminary talk for cafeteria). After three years of worshipping and praying together, studying and suffering through Church History, Greek and Hebrew together, working together and eating together something truly beautiful happened.

We all changed a little. For their part, many of the men who had been so vehemently opposed to women's ordination were now my friends, and their views had grown less extreme. Many changed completely. And they weren't the only ones. I changed too, for what is growth if not a form of change? I became less self-righteous in demanding my way, in believing my way was the best way forward and grew to understand why my fellow seminarians had the views they had. We all grew a little bit, grew closer to each other, closer to God, and grew into what Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. called the beloved community, because, as Dr. King said, the beloved community isn't a pipe dream, it is wherever and whenever people who consider each other enemies can live together in harmony because they first and foremost recognize each other as beloved by God.

Perhaps you've heard that story before, and I apologize if I'm repeating myself, but some things are worth repeating, and I often reflect back on the experience of that beloved community and how it came to be. It was a remarkable thing; where people were willing to be open, to change, and that means change doesn't have to be feared. The men who were worried women priests in the church meant less for them discovered there was plenty for everyone, including plenty of room.

I also shared that past event because I hope it will help us as we look at today's Gospel reading from Matthew, which is, at least for many of us, not an easy one because Jesus isn't looking his best in this part of Matthew's Gospel. Many a commentator has tried to justify Jesus' behavior or look compassionately at him by saying he was in the middle of his busiest time, people were not leaving him alone, and he was on an important mission from God. He's trying to fulfill the law and thereby live into what the chosen people of God had not been able to live into themselves. It's an important mission, and he couldn't be distracted. All those reasons can be understandable, but they still don't do much to soften what Jesus did and what he said to a woman who only asked for Jesus to heal her child. He had done

as much for a Roman Centurion, someone else who wasn't one of God's chosen people, who was a gentile, earlier in Matthew's Gospel, so what was his problem with the woman in today's story?

A lot of people have asked the same question for thousands of years, and none of us have ever been able to find a good, satisfactory answer. Maybe because it is so very hard to let go of our own stereotype of Jesus, or God, or change. Because Jesus did change in this story. He changed his mind and healed the woman's daughter, some say he changed his entire view on gentiles too. This is in fact a huge, significant change. And it is good news, very good news. So, what happened to make Jesus change?

To understand this story in Matthew's Gospel, it might help to look to the Old Testament, because the author of Matthew's Gospel used some Old Testament language in this story. Starting with that he called the woman: a Canaanite woman. By using the word Canaanite, Matthew's original audience would have heard not just a historical reference, but an anciently biblical one. Way back in the Old Testament books of Exodus and Joshua we can read the story of how after the People of Israel wandered around the wilderness for a generation they finally were allowed to enter the Promised Land, also called Canaan. But when they got there they discovered it was already occupied, and it was the original occupants, the Canaanites, they had to fight to gain possession of the land. Therefore, the Canaanites were not just pagans, gentiles, or outsiders to the People of Israel, Canaanites were their enemy. Over the centuries that word still represented the term enemy, perhaps like the word Yankee can for some.

So this woman wasn't just a gentile, she represented Israel's historical enemy. Maybe that is why the author of today's Gospel lesson had Jesus first ignore then insult the woman. There is more to this woman than where she came from. Did you notice when she first yelled her request for help she called Jesus Son of David? That is a Messianic term, and showed this woman was publicly identifying Jesus as the Messiah. Commentators point out her body position, kneeling in front of Jesus, is a posture of prayer and worship, with her whole being she seemed to be saying who Jesus is. And her words, "Lord, help me," are found in many psalms. She doesn't sound like an outsider to me; if she was, she had done her homework and was using Messiah language to try to communicate with the Messiah.

But it is the exchange between the woman and Jesus that seems to get his attention. After saying it isn't fair to deny children food in order to feed the dogs, which could be seen as a statement of scarcity, saying there isn't enough for everyone right now, the woman said and did something that makes her remarkable, at least in my eyes.

She didn't get offended. She didn't walk off in a huff. She didn't get violent. She responded first by agreeing it wouldn't be fair to give the children's food away to the dogs, who were not family pets in Jesus' day. AND, she went on to say that even dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the masters' table.

This statement may have something to do with what Jesus did; we need to remember that not that long ago in Matthew's Gospel, before this event, Jesus miraculously fed over 5,000 people and not only did everyone eat their fill, there were leftovers. 12 baskets worth of left overs. Which could symbolize the 12 tribes of Israel, or, this woman could be indicating, that there is more than enough to go around. Perhaps she was using Jesus' own activities against his statement. Not as a mic drop, not in a mean way, she didn't insult him, she indicated she saw there was more than enough to go around, not in some future date after Jesus completed his mission, but right there and then.

In our second reading today from Romans, we heard Paul reassure the Christians in Rome that salvation of all people is not a rejection of God's people. God's people don't lose anything by including others, there is room for all. And perhaps that is what Jesus saw and heard in the remarkable woman's response, and that is good news. Not just because Jesus immediately healed the woman's daughter, and not just because after this event Jesus will seem to be more open to including gentiles, but because of what this story could be saying about the Kingdom of God, the beloved community.

Perhaps one of our misconceptions about the Kingdom of God is that it is something Jesus brought to earth long ago, is not here now, and Jesus will bring it here again in some future date and until then, we human beings are to sit tight, wait patiently, pray and do the best we can until Jesus comes again. But maybe God's kingdom, the beloved community isn't something that will just happen to us, perhaps it is something we are invited to help create. To me, the exchange between Jesus and the remarkable woman in today's Gospel looks a lot like the arguments people of faith from the Old Testament, like Abraham, Moses, and Jonah to name a few, have had with God. And in their stories, God changed God's mind after listening to the people who argued with God. Always, the change was to extend mercy where God had been intending to punish. Even in the Old Testament, these arguments show us God is not an unmoving God, set on punishing or destroying people. God can be moved to mercy, compassion, and forgiveness when a person of faith is courageous enough to ask God for mercy, compassion, and forgiveness; for such is the nature of love and a God who loves us.

Perhaps that is how the beloved community comes to be, when we work with each other and with God. That is what I discovered in seminary years ago, and I believe that beloved community can happen anywhere and everywhere we all see each other, even people we believe to be our enemy, first as God's beloved. In these days after we see communities respond to white supremacy rallies with pain, anger and fear, many of us may wonder why these types of rallies are happening again, maybe we thought they were only the stuff of history to be watched on documentaries. The reality is now communities once again suffer pain and fear. Perhaps we all feel threatened, and wonder about the way forward.

I wish I had an easy answer for us. I really do. I wish it was easy to tell you what to do. But I don't have easy answers. And I'm sorry. Of course we need to speak against those of evil intent, those who demonize and dehumanize out of hate and fear. Many of us have been speaking against racism and white supremacy and all sorts of isms and phobias, which might make us feel all the more powerless in the face of recent current events. But then there are those glimmers, those times when friendships and relationships and the love of God can and do cause a change of heart, and enemies become friends, and the beloved community becomes reality. It is possible. That is why today's Gospel is good news, even if it didn't look like it at first.

The remarkable woman's courage to speak to Jesus shows us even the Son of God can change, can see that his plan of salvation could adapt, could change, and be more than perhaps even he imagined. The good news is we don't have to be afraid of all change, there is the holy kind, the change of heart that learns to see a sworn enemy as a beloved child of God, and when that happens, that's when healing begins. Maybe not quickly as we'd like, but it can, with God's help and our perseverance, there is hope, and that is worth working for and living into.